

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Rebecca E. Sparrow, February 7, 1902

1902, Feb. 7 Dear Miss Sparrow:—

I quite approve of your use of [??] excepting that I only use the vowel symbol where the sound constitutes a distinct syllable by itself. Where it is not syllabic I use it as a glide and do not distinguish it from voice glide (). The voice glide, or rather the voice symbol, without any determining point or hook, is an admirable symbol to be used freely for indefinite vowel or glide effects. In my own practice I use it for glide r and for large aperture vowels in unaccented syllables — for the indefinite article (where it is unaccented, e.g., a man, an apple). I write below my writing of the words more, mother, her, firm, defer, fire,

“Would you think it better in general to use [??] or [??] than [??]?”

My practice is to use [??] and [??] to express a definite vowel in an accented syllable, and to use [??] in unaccented syllables for indefinite large aperture vowels of all sorts, for example:— comfortable

A man An apple

Such terminations — able — ible — ance — ence &c. are much better represented for a deaf child by voice glide (/) than by a definite vowel symbol.

I don't see any advantage to be gained by joining the symbols 2 kt as suggested because the symbols mean (without any mark of junction) back-shut, followed by point-shut, without any puff of air between them . If we want a child to give the k and t their full effect, then I would write The letters [??]kt are joined in the ordinary print because k by itself is taught to a deaf child as and t as so that if you present the letters kt to a deaf child he naturally

Library of Congress

pronounces them and this usually leads to vocalization of the puff of air resulting in . Thus if you want to represent by Roman letters , kt will not do it, hence the joining may be advisable when people use Roman letters, but to my mind is not at all advisable where symbols are employed.

“Do you consider the back tongue position the same for [??] as for [??] I am inclined to think so, but in large aperture vowels like these, there may be very considerable variations in the mouth positions, without offending the ear, in fact in the case of large aperture vowels the ear does not expect or recognize a well differentiated sound. Our large aperture vowels represent not individual sounds, but groups of sounds, and the limits of acceptable variation are so large that these vowels hardly represent species of sound, they are more like genera than species or individual varieties. I have no doubt that our fore-fathers had actual use all the different varieties of vowel sounds that we possess, and yet they only discriminated five significant varieties which they represented by the letters a, e, i, o, u, These five letters no doubt represented five groups of sounds and as time progressed smaller groups were recognized as significant until today we have our small aperture vowels very sharply defined, only 3 slight variations from the normal being accepted as good English. All the large aperture vowels, however — my father's low vowels — are extremely indefinite in current speech, they represent groups of sounds of considerable size. Very considerable variations may be made from the standard position without the ordinary ear being conscious of the difference.

The sound you mention (short o) is one of the most variable we have. In America especially, it has become unrounded. The New Englanders, and specially the Bostonians, pronounce it as [??] instead of [??]. instead of for example.

What are we going to do in representing such variable sounds? I say LET THE SPELLING BE AS VARIABLE AS THE SOUND. Write what you do yourself; and if others write differently, do not consider their spelling as erroneous so long as they spell what they themselves say.

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I return the Visible Speech proofs to you, and have noted only what appear to be errors. I have not criticized the writing of large aperture vowels or diphthongal sounds where your writing differs from mine in cases where it seems obvious to me that you are depicting an allowable pronunciation.

One criticism I would make however, I don't think we want to introduce into Visible Speech printing , marks of punctuation, quotation marks, &c. These do not come in speech. Whatever their equivalents may be in speech let us represent these rather than the arbitrary marks of punctuation. I think it would be better instead of using such marks to GROUP THE WORDS TO THE EYE AS THEY ARE GROUPED TO THE EAR. Let there be a small space between words, if you will, and then larger spaces between the groups of words, For 4 example:—

“By all means and welcome”, said the Arab cheerfully; and the camel moved forward and stretched his head into the tent.

By all means and welcome said the Arab cheerfully and the camel moved forward and stretched his head into the tent

I would even go so far as to recommend writing a group of words in the way they are pronounced, viz: — without any separation between them. I am inclined to think that certainly the little words like a, an, the, with, but, and, &c. should be written in conjunction with the words they qualify and not separately, unless in special cases where we separate them in utterance. We do not say

We cannot use Roman letters in this way because the spelling is not phonetic, but with any phonetic alphabet the words may be run together as they are in utterance, and will be no more ambiguous 5 to the eye than they are to the ear. Phrase writing would be of the very greatest use to our deaf pupils. They are so accustomed to see words clearly separated

Library of Congress

from one another in print that it is very difficult to get rid of that vicious habit, word by word articulation.

Whether or not you should adopt phrase writing I would certainly recommend that the definite and indefinite articles should be attached closely to the words they refer to.

It has been very difficult for me to give time to the consideration of your letter — I should say letters, for I must acknowledge receipt of your note of February 2. Consider my letters to you as simply a TALK, and not as a carefully digested reply.

Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell